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ABSTRACT

The United Nations 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons offers a unique opportunity for broadening the basis of understanding of the library needs of the blind and print handicapped. There is room for both national and international development if traditionally publicity-shy and mostly nonaggressive librarians come forward and seize the opportunity of educating governments and the public at large. They must convince these audiences that books and library services are equally as important for the blind and print handicapped as ramps, crutches, and wheelchairs for the physically handicapped. These needs have not been specifically addressed in the early and medium stages of planning for 1981. We must not, at this stage, let the opportunity pass to become involved on a continuing basis as a legitimate part of this universal focus on the needs of the disabled. (Author/RAA)

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LIBRARY SERVICES FOR THE BLIND AND PRINT HANDICAPPED AND THE UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE DISABLED

by

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LIBRARY SERVICES FOR THE BLIND AND PRINT HANDICAPPED AND THE UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE DISABLED

Ruth A. Velleman, in her recently published book, "Serving Physically Disabled People - An Information Handbook for all Libraries" (New York, R.R. Bowker, 1980) says, "Until recently, disabled people in the United States have been denied access, - access to buildings, access to transportation and appropriate housing, access to education and employment, and access to information. Federal legislation has now made it clear that the United States will now no longer tolerate second class citizenship for its disabled population". The United States is neither alone nor particularly pioneering in its recognition of the disabled as equal citizens - although its new laws and attitudes probably go farther toward that goal than many other nations. Europe and many other countries have had legislation and special arrangements for their disabled populations as early as the beginning of the last century. Great Britain has established a special ministry at the federal level, coordinating services for the disabled and performing the role of advocacy for their cause. Even many developing countries whose cultures and heritages provided respect and dignity for its disabled in the past, but whose economies had forced an abandonment of these standards and attitudes over the years to the point where the adventitiously and congenially disabled were reduced to the lowest form of existence and social rank, are turning about and elevating the status of that population and recognizing its contributive potential.

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The role of librarians and libraries vis-a-vis the emerging constituency of the disabled is described by Ms. Velleman as follows:

> "The library profession has very specific obligations to this large segment of the population...to supply them with special materials and services. Public libraries need to adapt physical facilities and programs and maintain basic information and referral collections for disabled people. School librarians need to acquire enough knowledge about physical disabilities to enable them to work with disabled children, to learn about sources for special curriculum materials for teachers....and to be prepared to assist parents...."

She points out that the emergence of the 'library rights' of the disabled and the very high need for information of this group, has spawned many new forms of librarianship, including special education and rehabilitation librarianship.

There are fundamentally two kinds of barriers which libraries and their staffs need to overcome in order to serve the disabled. Physical barriers which block access to the exterior or interior of library buildings to those with ambulatory disabilities, and the barrier of print itself for those who for reasons of visual, physical or neural handicap cannot use it. We do not wish to dismiss the problems of the physically disabled, because they are real and often, -because of architectural carelessness and lack of foresight, -completely insurmountable. However, by and large, the physically disabled can use ordinary books and print materials, if these are delivered to them even if the library setting is inaccessible. The print-handicapped on the other hand cannot. Blindness and visual impairment, the physical inability to hold a book or move the eyes and neural inability to understand or comprehend words and sentences all are distinct <u>disabilities</u>. But more significantly, they result in the cultural and educational <u>handicap</u> of not being able to read books in their traditional state leading to the inaccessability of information. In terms of the United Nations and all its member states, education and information are basic undeniable human rights.

It is significant therefore that the creation of books and materials in alternative formats and their dissemination via libraries, be accepted by the United Nations and its member organizations as part of the focus of 1981 - The Year of the Disabled.

It seems regrettable that no specific mention is made of the information needs of the visually impaired and print handicapped in the U.N. Resolutions leading to the establishment of The Year of the Disabled or the document in 'Roun -up of Sessions - First Session of Advisory Committee for 1981, Year for Disabled Persons'.

The U.N. Advisory Committee recommended such sweeping programs as the establishment of a new international economic order to uplift many of the disabled from the squalor in which the financial discrepancy of their countries has placed them, and the elimination of political strife and war, since these result in disabling injuries. The Committee placed responsibility squarely into the hands of librarians and educators when it recommended that 'society has an obligation to make its general physical environment, its social services and its educational and work opportuniti.., as well as its cultural and social life totally accessible to its disabled people'. Although there are very few recommendations in practical every-day terms, and the organizing Committee obviously favored staying with generalities which may be interpreted and added to by individual member states, emphasis in planning The Year appears to have been placed on the physically disabled with ambulatory problems and the elimination of architectural barriers is specifically mentioned several times throughout the papers. The elimination of cultural barriers such as lack of access to information is not singled out unfortunately. The U.N. Committee simply recommends that as a program for The Year, countries should be 'investigating those restrictions and discriminatory actions that limit the freedom of disabled people fully to participate in society and take whatever measures are necessary to remedy the situation'.

The U.N. Committee recommends that no international conferences or congresses be held on the subject of disability (since an international meeting on rehabilitation is being held in June 1980 at Winnipeg, Canada) and that instead, effort and funding be expended by the United Nations, its various organizations and member countries on action-oriented programs, which will create tangible progress and services.

It is clear therefore, that the need for library materials and services for the blind and print handicapped, must be brought to the attention of the United Nations and the organizers of activities at national levels. The 'disabled' have become defined as those with ambulatory, or other physical problems restricting movement. The blind and visually impaired have been left behind to some extent, specifically in many developed countries due to a large and effective public relations effort by the organizations of and for the physically disabled and due to protective service and rehabilitation agencies, which have tended to isolate and shelter the blind from the rest of society.

Books and materials and the library services which disseminate these on the other hand, have been taken for granted, and that while the general public might be aware that the blind and visually impaired cannot use ordinary books, they are under the impression that braille fulfills this gap. Clearly, what is needed for The Year of Disabled Persons, is a public relations campaign focussing on the need of materials in print alternatives and for libraries and educational institutions to integrate these materials into their existing collections and for special libraries to be created.

It should be recommended that the I.F.L.A. Round Table on Library Services for the Blind, via its international parent organization, contact the United Nations 1981 Organizing Committee with the view of having library and book services for the blind and print handicapped recognized as one of the legitimate activities of The Year of Disabled Persons. Secondly, any follow-up studies on the successes and failures of The Year should include examinations of library and book services also.

The Round Table should petition the International Federation of Library Associations to urge its member associations to plan workshops, publicity and educational sessions on national levels in order to educate librarians about materials in print alternatives and about serving the disabled in their communities.

The Round Table should launch an appeal to the United Nations and specifically to UNESCO and the World Health Organization for funding of projects related to the creation of talking book, braille and large print materials for use in developing countries.

The Round Table needs to plan concerted action to move awareness of the reading needs of the blind and print handicapped outside of the library sector. Educational and health authorities need to be contacted as well as vocational and rehabilitation organizations. The therapeutic and occupational effect of reading has been little explored, and there is to date little coordination between rehabilitation and vocational training agencies and libraries or producers of materials for the blind. This educational process among libraries and educational/rehabilitation/vocational institutions should be conducted on an international basis, coordinated by one or another of the United Nations' divisions.

Under the U.N. 1981 Adivsory Committee's recommendation:

"That the United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme, organize in 1981 an action-oriented symposium on technical co-operation among developing countries and technical assistance for disabled persons in these countries."

an effort should be made to include experts on talking books and other print alternatives with a view of uniting the multiplicity of formats now in existance for the purpose of sharing resources among developed and developing countries.

Under the Committee's recommendation,

"That an international fund be established to assist developing countries on a continuing basis to establish and develop

services for disabled people...."

that appeals may be made to this proposed fund for the establishment and development of library services for the blind and print handicapped.

Conclusion

It appears that the United Nations - 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons offers a unique opportunity of broadening the basis of understanding of the library needs of the blind and print handicapped. It appears also that there is room for both national and international development in this area, if traditionally publicity-shy and mostly non-aggressive librarians come forward and seize the opportunity of educating the public at large and governments specifically, that books and library services are as important for the blind and print handicapped as ramps, crutches and wheel chairs for the physically disabled. It appears also that the needs of the blind and print handicapped were not being considered specifically in the early and medium stages of planning for 1981, so that we must not let the opportunity pass in order to become involved at this stage and on a continuing basis, as a legitimate part of this universal focus on the needs of the disabled.

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Submitted June 1980 to the Round Table on Library Services for the Blind, International Federation of Library Associations, Boston, U.S.A.